

SERI ETHNOBIOLOGY: A PRELIMINARY REPORT¹

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In this paper I shall attempt to summarize briefly some of the possibilities inherent in ethnobiological studies. Ethnobiologies, published so far, have either stressed only the economic or medicinal uses of animals or have just included them as part and parcel of mythology and religion. The emphasis here, on the other hand, is primarily on the aboriginal knowledge of natural history and naturalistic concepts about animals. A comparison with the actual situation in nature will be frequently made in order to test the accuracy of the native observation.

This account is part of a wider comparative study in ethnobiology of several aboriginal groups. Additional field work has recently been completed among two other tribes, the Cere in Nayarit, Mexico, and the Sere in northern Nicaragua.

Ethnobiological studies of such scope require much more extensive background in natural history than anthropologists or even zoologists today are likely to have. One has to deal with very diverse groups of animals and I have found my own knowledge of the subject repeatedly inadequate on many occasions. It is hoped that a study of this sort will attract individuals who will cover more satisfactorily the entire range of the animal kingdom.

Economic Uses

825 Almost all major classes of animals, with the exception of the insects,
362 are used for food. Only a very limited number of species serve other purposes
439 such as trade with the Mexicans. Among these are various species of large
fishes, sea-turtles and a number of shells. These are used for the basic nutritional products such as vitamins, clothing, and other items of the material culture, for these are purchased ready-made in the local Mexican "tiendas" (small general store).

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As a major source of income for their livelihood the Sere depend mainly upon a few commercially significant species of large fish and sea-turtles. Yet they do exploit a wide range of the animal environment as a source of additional food. Of the total number of species of animals upon which information has been available, 155 were reported as economically exploited. The table below gives the breakdown of the major groups.

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	<u>Class</u>	<u>Species Reported</u>	<u>Species Exploited</u>	<u>Percentage</u>
825	Mammals	21	9	46
262	Birds	28	6	25
	Reptiles and Amphibians	25	11	44
	Fish	44	23	52
	Molluscs	36	21	58
	Crustaceans	10	2	20
	Total:	160	72	45

These figures show clearly the dependence of the Seris on marine life for a major source of their diet. Today, pista, baya, calon and sardines are their primary source of income with meat and sea-turtles ranking second in importance. Several species of class, lizards and gastropods supplement this diet.

226 All other animals represent only incidental additions to the menu. During the last war, sharks and mantas were hunted extensively for their liver, then a source of vitamin D. But since the war, the demand for shark liver has declined and because of this, a considerable income for the Seris has been lost. Shark and manta fishing have been abandoned for these fish 439 were taken only for the commercially profitable liver and not for their flesh.

Fishing and Hunting

177 Seri fishing techniques are simple. In the past they used double-pronged spears and for the larger fish, harpoons. Today the spears are employed 226 chiefly in fishing while the harpoons are reserved exclusively for sea-turtles. Hook and line fishing was introduced after 1930, as Kroeber (1931) saw none during his visit to Kiso in 1930, and it is now the standard method of fishing. An abortive and unsuccessful attempt was made several years ago with net fishing. Another change has occurred within the past fifty years. The old 509 balsas have been replaced by flat-bottomed plank boats outfitted with five-horsepower motors or sails. These motors, incidentally, are leased from the 537 Mexican fish traders because none of the Seris are rich enough to own one.

Bait is obtained by dynamiting schools of small fish in coastal waters or by collecting them at low tide in the tidal pools and from under rocks. Fishing usually begins at dawn and lasts until noon when, as a rule, all of the "pargas", as the boats are called, return to Desemboque. In stormy weather no fishing expeditions are made and when this occurs, starvation becomes a real menace. Harpooning of sea-turtles takes place far out in the Gulf. It is done only at night in exceptionally calm weather by the light of 1373 torches or Coleman lanterns.

224 Hunting as it is done today has changed from the time of McGee's visit in 1894-95. The bow and arrow has disappeared completely except for a crude and 411 distractive form used as a toy by small boys. Iron spears once used in shark and manta hunting are now carried primarily as a weapon against the numerous and much feared rattlesnakes. They are said to be used occasionally in the peccary hunt. Old .22s or 30/30 rifles are owned by several of the men, some of whom specialize in hunting.

464 Last year the Seris and their families worked on the ranches
• 434 gathering corn and beans and made three thousand pesos, and then they
484 came to town to spend it. They go back and forth much more than they
used to.

123 We ate supper with Mrs. Thomson and then we went to the Plaza to
watch the carnival. Much confetti and *cascaroni* was thrown on boys
and girls, and the square was thronged by a mass of weaving people,
while the military band played seductive Mexican pieces.

The next morning after breakfast we started shopping and kept at
it all day, purchasing things to trade with the Indians and groceries
for them and ourselves.

While at one of the stores six or eight Yaqui Indians, from their
town about one hundred and thirty miles distant, came to buy things
for the Easter period. This is the one big fiesta of the year for
them. The women were bare-footed and the men wore rawhide sandals.
One Yaqui soldier came with them, and he wore three belts of ammu-
nition. They were very dark, with short hair. Rather gaunt, fierce,
striking faces.

We walked into a cigarette factory and saw them manufacture ciga-
rettes by machinery. Four machines were running, turning out one hun-
dred and sixty each per minute. Altogether, twenty-three thousand
packets of fourteen each every eight hours. These packets are usually
tied together in the shape of a solid wheel, one hundred packets each
called a *ruedo*, or wheel.

After dinner we went to Roberto's house and they told us there
that the Indian boy Pascual had gone out alone and was lost. The Cap-
tain left to hunt for him and later brought him in, and then he went
out to hunt for us. We finally saw him on a side street and sent him
home to his dinner.

Last night, Roberto said they slept up till midnight, then waked
up, opened the bride's bundle, and gloated over the bright colors.
Later on they opened it twice again. Then they sang and talked for a
while before going to sleep again.

On the following day it was nearly three in the afternoon before
we got the car repaired and all supplies on board, including our
blankets and grips and lumber for a *Seri balsa*, or boat. This was a
heavy load for the Ford truck besides five men, which included the
two Indians. Every item had to be considered---food for ourselves and
the Indians, all the trade things, lumber for a boat and tools to
make it, gas, oil, cans for water and many other things.

We soon left the city behind and rattled through the outskirts of
poor adobe or stick mud houses, many half in ruins but still shelter-
ing some family.

After about fifteen or twenty miles we arrived at one of Rafael
Ysabel's ranches, *Europa*, where Senor Felix is the foreman or *Mayordano*.